

Quality first

Fiscal responsibility is a good thing. It is easy to agree that both individuals and state governments should live within their means. But if you needed a life-saving operation, you would focus first on making sure you could get it, and then see what you could do to lower the cost without compromising the outcome. Making college education in Ohio efficient and affordable is important but policymakers in Ohio need to bear in mind that the primary goal must be to deliver a high-quality education that genuinely prepares our citizens to meet the pressing economic and cultural needs of our state today and tomorrow.

In early 2015, Governor Kasich issued an executive order that established the Ohio Task Force on Affordability and Efficiency in Higher Education. That Task Force made a set of recommendations about ways that state-sponsored institutions of higher education can be more efficient, offering an education of equal or higher quality while at the same time decreasing their costs. Each of the public universities in Ohio was required to submit a report last month that lists the ways they have individually responded to those recommendations. Those reports all go into detail about a wide range of cost savings measures and partnerships but attention to “quality” is noticeably absent from those reports. Even though every public four-year university in Ohio took great care in preparing their lengthy affordability and efficiency reports, those reports leave us to question whether the delivery of a high quality education to our students will continue to be our single highest priority.

Anticipating Governor Kasich’s Task Force, the Ohio Faculty Council suggested in 2014 that quality in higher education must be assessed with new metrics that look directly at the value-added to 21st century students. Those metrics could include: the ratio of full-time to adjunct faculty; course completion; graduate employment/satisfaction; employer satisfaction; experiential learning embedded in real-world contexts, and graduation. Employers and society in general should expect that college graduates are engaged employees and citizens with well-developed problem solving skills.

A preoccupation with present-day costs can be paralyzing – and, ultimately inefficient and counter-productive in the long term. The Governor’s Task Force on Affordability and Efficiency in Higher Education is now reviewing the responses to its recommendations and is expected to make suggestions about ways that future reports could be more helpful. Let’s hope that neither the task force nor our state universities lose sight of the importance of keeping quality our highest priority for public universities in Ohio.

To paraphrase Nicholas Sparks, “Frugality has its own cost, one that sometimes lasts forever.”

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